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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the education of a population that is increasingly diverse, linguistically and culturally, this paper argues that non-mainstream students do not perform as well in school as predominantly white, middle-class, English-speaking mainstream students because they are not equitably served by the educational system. Some complexities of educational equity are explored and equity issues in literacy education of language minority students are analyzed from four perspectives: individual student differences; sociocultural factors; language issues; and curriculum and instruction. It is concluded that perceptions of students as individuals must be balanced with perceptions of them as members of social and cultural groups, and that the well-documented mismatch between home and school language use for non-mainstream students causes difficulties because school expectations are based on mainstream language patterns; it does not indicate a lack of interest in or preparation for school. Few educational programs tap and develop native language abilities among bilingual students, and non-European content is generally absent from curricula. Literacy education for language minority students generally relies on strategies designed for mainstream students but with more emphasis on correctness and basic skills. Suggestions for making literacy education more equitable are offered. (Author/MSE)

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Literacy Education and Diversity:
Toward Equity in the Teaching of Reading and Writing

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Abstract

The school-age population in North America is characterized by increasing linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. The authors argue that non-mainstream students do not perform as well in schools as mainstream students (predominantly white, middle-class English speakers) because they are not equitably served by the educational system. They explore some of the complexities of educational equity and present an analysis of equity issues in the literacy education of language minority students from four different perspectives: individual differences among students, sociocultural factors, language issues, and curriculum and instruction. In support of their position, they examine each of these areas in turn, providing illustrations and analysis. Some of their points: Perceptions of students as individuals must be balanced with perceptions of them as members of social and cultural groups, since ignorance of students' social and cultural milieux and complete reliance on social and cultural information are equally unproductive. The well-documented mismatch between home and school language for non-mainstream students causes difficulties because school expectations are based on language patterns in mainstream homes; it does not indicate lack of interest in or preparation for school by non-mainstream children and their families. Although evidence indicates that incorporation of students' native languages and cultures into the school facilitates their learning, few educational programs tap and develop native language abilities among bilingual students, and non-European content is typically absent from school curricula and materials. Despite a growing body of research on literacy acquisition among diverse student groups, literacy instruction for language minority students generally relies on strategies designed for mainstream students but with far greater emphasis on correctness and basic skills. The authors conclude with concrete suggestions for ways to make literacy education more equitable for all students.

Introduction

Observation of a high school writing class in 1988 acted as a catalyst for the articulation of several questions that we had been mulling over in our attempts to unravel some of the complexities involved in providing equitable literacy instruction to students of diverse backgrounds. As we struggled with these questions, a framework for addressing the issues emerged -- a framework which forms the basis for this article.

The writing class we observed, which met just after the 1988 Olympics, was part of the school's Chapter I program (for students in low socioeconomic brackets who have scored below the 36th percentile on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills or equivalent). It was made up of nine male students -- two African Americans, one Vietnamese French speaker, one Filipino, four Latinos, and one Middle Easterner -- most of whom were non-native speakers of English. On the day of our observation, the students were practicing writing a letter-to-the-editor in preparation for upcoming competency tests.

The teacher first showed a video of the Olympics' closing ceremonies and a brief interview with Canadian runner Ben Johnson, telling the students to decide what the "message" of the video was. After watching, a few students said they thought the video was about succeeding despite difficulties, and the teacher agreed. She then asked the students to write in class for fifteen minutes about whether they believed it was true that Ben Johnson had used steroids, whether it is "right or wrong" for athletes to use anabolic steroids, and whether justice was served by withdrawing Ben Johnson's Gold Medal after his steroid use was discovered. She wrote the words *anabolic steroids* and *Ben Johnson* on the board, without explaining what anabolic steroids were, who Ben Johnson was, or what transpired in Seoul regarding his steroid use. She also wrote the following on the board as guidelines for their writing:

Truth -- Yes/No? Why?

Right/Wrong? Why?

Example to the world of what?

This classroom activity raises several important questions about teaching literacy and language arts to minority students. First, how have the students' individual backgrounds and experiences prepared them for the task? Had these students been watching the Olympics on television, and did they know about the controversy surrounding Ben Johnson? Did they have some understanding of the complex system of international athletics? Second, is the task appropriate given students' cultural backgrounds? Was there some consensus about what "right" and "wrong" meant in the context of the task? Were the students interested in the Olympics and in sports in general? Were they comfortable expressing their own opinions in class? Third, what language difficulties might they encounter and how can these be addressed? Would a discussion of useful vocabulary have facilitated the students' success with this assignment? Did they understand the meaning of "anabolic steroids"? Finally, was instruction designed for the language minority students to whom it was delivered? Would the students have been more successful if the lesson had included discussion, collaborative writing, and vocabulary work?

In this article, we examine equity issues in literacy learning and instruction for language minority students, offering some suggestions for equitable practices. We consider these issues from the four different perspectives suggested by the questions raised above: individual differences among students, sociocultural factors, language issues, and curriculum and instruction. These perspectives not only provide us with a means for presenting our arguments but can also serve as a framework for teacher trainers as they prepare teachers to enter multicultural classrooms and for curriculum developers and teachers as they ask themselves whether the curriculum and instruction they are designing provides opportunities for all students to develop their reading and writing skills.

Though many of the issues raised apply to all aspects of minority education, we will focus primarily on literacy education for two reasons. First, as the primary goal of formal education, the teaching and learning of literacy skills are thoroughly woven into the fabric of schooling. Students can hardly succeed in any aspect of schooling without developing

literacy skills. Second, literacy ability (as contrasted with language ability) is unevenly distributed in U.S. society along class and ethnic lines (Collins, 1987; Hendrix, 1981). That is, on the one hand, literacy ability is synonymous with being an educated person -- an ostensible goal for all -- and, on the other, disparities in literacy ability separate the more powerful from the less powerful. Characterized thus, educational equity in literacy education is a compelling subject for exploration.

In writing this article, we have been faced with choices about what vocabulary to use in referring to different types of students and settings and have been struck once again by the inadequacy of the language that has developed to discuss these issues. We have chosen our vocabulary recognizing that it does not satisfactorily capture the realities being considered and that certain words have connotations which we would prefer to avoid. We use the term "language minority" to refer to students from home backgrounds where the native language of caretakers is not the language of instruction. In the U.S., these students are overwhelmingly non-white and non-middle class. We use the term "minority" sparingly to refer to students of ethnic backgrounds and social classes other than white and middle class. We use the term "mainstream" to refer to the largely unexamined group of students whose backgrounds are most congruent with school structure and organization -- mostly white, mostly middle class users of standard English (see LeCompte, 1985). Conversely, "non-mainstream" students are those who are mostly non-white, mostly non-middle class; they may or may not be native speakers of English. These last distinctions we consider the most relevant to our discussion of literacy instruction for diverse student populations.

Educational Equity: The Topography

Educational equity entails unbiased access for all students to the societal skills and knowledge the school curriculum is intended to impart -- regardless of race, culture, gender, ethnicity, native language, and individual differences. Thus, with respect to literacy education, language and other minority children do not have to demonstrate that they have the same academic "readiness" or predisposition, the same English language

proficiency, or even the same ability as mainstream children in order to qualify for undifferentiated access.

In practice, as we all know, educational equity issues are notoriously difficult to identify and resolve, especially in advanced industrial societies like the United States, partly because of the complex and multidimensional nature of these issues. First, the educational system serves dual functions in these societies. It is an agent of change in its fostering of cognitive and social growth, but it is also an agent for maintaining the status quo -- two not entirely compatible functions. On the one hand, the purpose of education is to provide students with knowledge, abilities, and greater potential for social mobility and to prepare them to become thoughtful, critical adults. On the other hand, our educational system is the primary social institution responsible for cultural transmission, relied upon to reflect and uphold dominant values in areas as varied as punctuality, deference to authority, competitiveness, and attitudes toward members of different races and social classes (Aarons, 1983; Apple, 1979; McGroarty, 1986; Spindler, 1974). These dominant values typically do not accommodate the experiences of students from cultural or ethnic minority groups. Thus, an implicit goal of education is to insure that students of diverse backgrounds learn and conform to the interactional norms and expectations of mainstream culture. The growth of knowledge, abilities, social mobility, and thinking resulting from education must conform to mainstream expectations if they are to be valued.

A second complexity is that what people say they believe with regard to educational equity is not always consistent with what they do. Dominant groups, for example, espouse the notion of universal education as a legacy of the democratic idealism on which the United States was founded; at the same time, to maintain their dominant status, they must support socially sanctioned ways to differentiate between themselves and those of lesser status.

As Heath (1981) points out, mass literacy is a relatively recent notion, not firmly entrenched as a principle in the public consciousness. Therefore, while purporting to

support education for all, dominant group members remain reticent to admit those traditionally thought of as having lesser status into the society of literate thinkers (Hendrix, 1981), persisting in the nineteenth century belief "that 'mass education,' 'mass literacy,' etc., necessarily involves a cheapening or a debasing of culture, language, and literature" (Szwed, 1981, p. 21). In this vein, proponents of the "cultural literacy" movement argue that European thinking constitutes the foundation for U.S. society and that therefore the writings of Europeans should constitute the foundation for U.S. education. They give little attention to works by non-Europeans (or by females) in recommending what students in U.S. schools should read, thereby sending the message that literacy in non-European traditions counts for less than literacy in the European tradition.

Non-mainstream groups are also caught in a double bind. They must rely on the system for institutional protection of their right to maintain their cultures, yet at the same time the system invalidates their aspirations and values and perpetuates their disenfranchisement. Unlike the mainstream population the system is set up to serve, non-mainstream groups cannot impose their own standards on policy-making for the general populace. In arguing their interests, they are compelled to claim alternately that they are both different from and the same as their mainstream counterparts, as they vigilantly monitor the tensions between assimilation and self-preservation as a culture. For example, advocates for language minority students argue for special programs to teach English and the content areas to limited English proficient students, while at the same time struggling to prevent schools from perpetually tracking students in special "low-ability" programs.

A third complexity is that groups may shift their stances with regard to their own and others' status in society. For example, members of societally privileged groups, such as mainstream North Americans, secure in the dominance of their language and culture, tend to oppose government action to protect language, citing philosophical principles having to do with the dangers of "too much government" leading to overdependency on the state and intrusion on individual rights. If these same groups come to perceive that their

language and/or culture are threatened, they may actively seek laws to maintain their linguistic and cultural traditions, citing principles emphasizing the government's responsibility to defend the rights of all citizens.

An example is the recent movement by some mainstream English speakers in the U.S. to pass "English-Only" laws, as they become increasingly aware of and uncomfortable with the growing numbers of linguistic minorities who wish to use their native languages in public life. A second example can be drawn from the Canadian context. Until recently, the English-speaking population in Quebec perceived themselves as belonging to the Canadian English majority and had little interest in legislation in the area of language. But since 1977, under the current language legislation in Quebec, Bill 101, Quebec's Anglophones have been recognized by the state as a linguistic minority. Insecure in their revised status, they are calling on both their federal and provincial parliaments to enact and enforce laws protecting their perceived right to express themselves in English in all areas of public life.

Society's reticence to identify educational equity issues cannot be attributed entirely to their complexity, however. Another factor is that these inequities are largely invisible to dominant group members because the ill effects of differential access are outside their immediate experience and it is not in their interest to identify and monitor such effects. In fact, dominant groups tend to consider the status of minority groups only when minority group behavior is identified as a serious societal problem.

Largely because of the inability of the mainstream population to acknowledge and define educational equity issues confronting language minorities, a great deal of ignorance continues to surround the school performance of minority students, leading to simplistic interpretations and facile solutions. One example of such ignorance is the prevailing belief among mainstream groups that non-mainstream students fail at school because their families do not support the efforts of the educational system.

There are two serious problems with such "deficit hypothesis" thinking. First, it places primary responsibility for minority students' successes and failures at acquiring literacy outside the educational system. And second, it is based on several inaccurate assumptions -- for example, that the educational system provides equal opportunity for all students and that these institutional efforts are being thwarted by counterproductive attitudes and behaviors on the part of non-mainstream families.

We believe that the primary responsibility for the success or failure of all students -- including linguistic and other minority students -- to acquire literacy skills rests with the schools, that non-mainstream students do not have the degree of access to the school curriculum that mainstream students enjoy, and that schools are accountable for addressing this inequity. The discussion below provides a framework for addressing issues of equity in literacy instruction and thus for redressing long-standing inequities.

Perspectives on Literacy Instruction for Students from Diverse Language and Ethnic Backgrounds

Individual Differences

In our perceptions of and interactions with all students, we have to balance our knowledge of them as individuals and our understanding of them as members of social and cultural groups. Ignorance of students' social and cultural milieux can lead to serious miscommunication in the classroom, while complete reliance on social and cultural facts in interactions with students can lead to equally unproductive stereotyping. This tension is especially acute with minority students, who stand to lose the most if they are treated either as stereotyped representatives of a stigmatized group or as individuals from cultural and social contexts indistinct from those of mainstream students. While a knowledge of different cultural values can make us aware of the influence of culture on individuals, cultural stereotyping can blind us to the myriad of relevant individual experiences and perceptions that influence students' learning. We, thus, "need to be able to use knowledge

of culture judiciously in order not to stereotype students but to serve them better" (McGroarty, 1986, p. 305).

Given the realities of class size, time limitations, and the human inclination to impose order upon chaos by classifying things and people, it would be impossible for teachers to perceive and interact with every student as an individual all the time. Despite our inclinations to generalize, particularly in circumstances where we are trying to make sense of phenomena we cannot understand, it is important to try to avoid generalizations which stereotype students and to constantly remind ourselves that students bring individual experiences, preferences, and personalities to school with them which not only influence their school success (Paris and Wixson, 1987) but also provide rich material for classroom instruction and activities.

For example, a student from a family with a long tradition of formal education and literacy will respond differently to particular educational approaches than a student from a family without such a tradition. Similarly, a student responsible for being the literate person in the family (see, e.g., Trueba, 1984) will have a different motivation to learn than a student who expects to quit school and go to work. As part of classroom activities, students can be encouraged to write and share their personal and family histories, enriching their understanding of themselves and the knowledge of others in the class. Those who know about literate forms and functions in different cultures and contexts (for example, different styles and occasions for storytelling) can report on them to their classmates, thus learning that their experience is valued while teaching others.

Students' literacy experiences. Just as we need to be careful not to generalize based on ethnic stereotypes, we must also avoid generalizing about the experiences and expectations of non-mainstream students based on those of mainstream students. In order to avoid stereotypes, we must know something about our students as individuals. We should not assume, for example, that all children have access to written materials or that written materials are used in the same ways in all families. Teachers can benefit from

knowledge of the functions and forms of literacy in the daily lives of individual students of all backgrounds and in the lives to which they aspire, for example (see Heath, 1981, 1983; Hendrix, 1981; Trueba, 1984). In a study conducted in an ESL writing class (Lucas, 1987), students' past writing experiences proved to be one of the most salient influences on their learning of a written genre. Despite their similar social and cultural backgrounds, two Thai women could hardly have responded more differently to the writing assigned in the class. One of them embraced the journal writing she was asked to do while the other resisted, writing informative rather than reflective papers.

Students' interests and concerns. Besides learning about students' experiences with schooling and with literacy, teachers also need to know about their students' interests and concerns. The educators associated with the Writer's Workshop approach (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) take this fact into account, advocating the importance of allowing students to choose their own topics for writing and to select the books they read for school. This work, however, grew out of and has generally been applied to classes consisting primarily of mainstream students. "High-ability" groups typically participate in Writer's Workshop; students in "low-ability" classes (i.e., minority students) are more likely to spend their time on more controlled sentence- and paragraph-level work and to be assigned topics deemed "appropriate" for their ability level.

Yet all students will perform better and become more engaged in reading and writing activities if the content makes sense to them and has some relevance to their lives. Different interests and concerns need to be taken into account in lesson plans and writing assignments in order to engage students and offer them the opportunity to expand their understanding and knowledge by learning from those who are different from themselves. Since we inevitably differ from each of our students in a number of ways (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, age, and education, to name a few), we cannot know what makes sense and is relevant to them without asking.

Students' personal experiences. To some extent, teachers also need information about their students' personal experiences. Many recent immigrants, especially those from Central America and Southeast Asia, have experienced trauma related to war and political upheaval (see Olsen, 1988). Some have seen relatives and others be killed, die of starvation, or perish at sea. Many are living new lives in new countries without family, having made the journey alone. Such traumas are especially dramatic examples of the many experiences that affect students' performance in school.

In sum, we must constantly remind ourselves that each student is a unique individual, and we must find out as much as we can about each of them. Taking the time to find out about students' life experiences, schooling experiences, literacy experiences, and their interests and areas of knowledge can help us get to know each child and avoid stereotypes upon which we might otherwise rely.

Sociocultural Factors

The second perspective being taken here is complementary to the first. That is, while students are individuals with unique experiences, preferences, and personalities, they are, at the same time, shaped by their sociocultural contexts. Educators who know about the customs and values of students' current social networks, their economic circumstances, and their cultural backgrounds are likely to be more effective than those who perceive and interact with students primarily as stereotypical members of sociocultural groups. Beyond simply becoming informed about students' backgrounds, teachers can also fulfill their role as change agents by promoting value and respect for the diversity represented by their students.

Students' cultural and social contexts. Without knowledge of our students' backgrounds and strategies for bridging the communication gap between ourselves and students of other backgrounds, we may misinterpret and misunderstand students' behavior, attitudes, and abilities. These communication breakdowns may prevent the development of trusting and productive relationships between educators and students of different

backgrounds. Examples abound of teachers misinterpreting students' culturally-based patterns of classroom participation and interaction, for example.

If such outcomes are to be avoided, we need to know about our students' social and cultural contexts: Where are they and their parents from? With what cultural and ethnic groups do they identify? What religion do they and their parents subscribe to? What values, customs, and views are associated with these national, cultural, ethnic, and religious groups? Further, we need to learn about the contexts for literacy in our students' lives: the role of education and of literacy in their cultures and in their current social situations. We can integrate such information into our classes as we engage our students in reading and writing activities, by including literature from and about diverse groups and by encouraging students to write about their lives and their cultures, including the roles and uses of literacy in them. If we establish classroom contexts in which students feel safe communicating with others about their lives and their cultures, they can teach each other as well as us.

Our own beliefs, values, identities. But we must go further than simply learning about students' sociocultural contexts and incorporating that knowledge into instruction. We must also respect and value diversity ourselves and instill these values in our students. This requires us to examine our own values, beliefs, and identities and societal and educational racism, ethnocentrism, linguocentrism, sexism, and classism to prepare for dealing equitably and effectively with students of diverse backgrounds. We can engage in such examination and reflection by reading professionally and non-professionally, attending conferences, participating in community activities, and discussing issues with others.

In the classroom, we can continue this process of questioning, analyzing, and learning by engaging ourselves and our students in a process of self-exploration and introspection regarding their histories, values, and perceptions. Encouraging students to read about diverse experiences and cultures and to write about their own not only informs

them and their readers but also shows them the diversity of experiences and perceptions represented by the individual students in their classes.

The "-isms" are like monsters that most of us are reluctant to face. We are afraid that if we bring racism, for example, out into the full light of day for reflection or for discussion in our classrooms, something terrible might happen -- we and others might become uncomfortable, difficult feelings might surface, tensions might arise. But there is no better way to vanquish monsters than to face them squarely. Teachers and students of all national and ethnic backgrounds can grow personally and come to understand each other better by openly acknowledging and examining the -isms and their own feelings and attitudes in relation to them.

Our attitudes and those of our students do not exist in a vacuum, of course, nor does the educational system. We must acknowledge to ourselves and to our students that school is a political institution, one purpose of which is to transmit domimant group values and one outcome of which is to perpetuate dominant group power (Aarons, 1983; Apple, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977; Villegas, 1988). This is another fact that may be difficult to face, flying in the face of democratic ideals as it does. But pretending that schools provide equitable opportunities for all can only contribute to inequity. We can work toward greater equity by working toward our own and facilitating our students' sociopolitical awareness. Again, open discussion of these issues is the best way to understand and influence them.

Language issues

One crucial element of both identity and schooling is language. Everyone agrees that language and literacy development should receive special attention in the schooling of language minority children; they disagree about appropriate approaches and emphases.

Mainstream and non-mainstream disparities in home precursors to literacy. In North America, the ability to acquire literacy in English and to display knowledge through the genres valued by the school are crucial to the success of all students (Heath, 1986). Disparities between mainstream and non-mainstream children in home precursors to literacy

are by now well-documented by researchers and recognized by practitioners as a major influence on the education of linguistic minority students (e.g., Heath,1983; McDermott, 1974; Michaels & Collins,1984). Discussions of this phenomenon generally focus on the ways in which mainstream families anticipate the functions and uses of oral and written genres sanctioned by the school and prepare their children accordingly for the culture of the classroom.

Such discussions often emphasize that mainstream mothers read bedtime stories to their children which are set in a place and time other than the here-and-now, so that mainstream children learn at an early age to interpret and predict text from context and describe events and objects outside their immediate environments. They also point out that mainstream mothers tend to act and speak in ways which anticipate and model language use patterns in classrooms: they ask questions for which they already have answers, and when no response is forthcoming, they provide one. In this manner, mainstream families mediate between their children and the written text in ways similar to those of primary school teachers (Heath, 1982; Wells, 1985).

Similarly, these discussions generally underscore how non-mainstream families' expectations about language use differ from those of the school, and how minority children are socialized into styles of learning, communicating, and interacting with adults and among peers that are different from those expected in the mainstream classroom (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983). Because minority pre-school children do not develop a meta-awareness of the functions and uses of language sanctioned by the school, the reasoning goes, they "lag behind" their peers in literacy skills from the start of their formal schooling experience.

The mistmatch between home and school language uses in the experience of minority children is generally taken to mean that minority parents are not effectively preparing their children for school. But this is deficit thinking: it blames the families of non-mainstream students for not being like the mainstream children for whom the schools

are designed. All families are concerned with educating their children to approach learning tasks effectively. The critical issue is that the schools' expectations are based on language patterns in mainstream homes, and consequently educators fail to make use of the language and problem-solving skills minority students bring to the classroom. Because their language skills are not validated by the school, minority children grow to believe that their ways of using language are wrong, thus compounding the "mismatch" problem with low self-esteem.

As Collins (1988) points out, "the critical issue is not just that discontinuities exist, but rather that they trigger implicit evaluations which in intricate ways reinforce larger institutional patterns of unequal treatment" (p.309). Michaels' observations (1981) of children engaging in sharing time illustrate this point very well. The structure of the African American children's sharing time stories differed from that of the mainstream teacher and the mainstream students. As a result, both teacher and students became frustrated, and the African American children received fewer positive and reinforcing responses from the teacher than did the other children. Rather than being seen simply as different, the approach taken by the African American children "triggered implicit evaluations," and was treated as less desirable and less appropriate than that taken by the mainstream children.

Given that discontinuities do exist and that they elicit evaluations which work to the disadvantage of non-mainstream students, educators have at least three options: Maintain the current structure and expectations of schools and hope that everyone will conform to them; maintain the current structure and expectations of schools and devise effective ways of teaching non-mainstream students to participate successfully; change the educational system to increase the congruence between school and home learning. Clearly, the second two options are more humane than the first.

Many minority parents consider the second approach more effective than the third in preparing their children to compete successfully in mainstream work and educational

environments. They see the third approach -- modifying school language to more closely match home language use -- as likely to keep their children forever shut out from higher paying jobs and fulfilling careers by perpetuating the differences that work to their disadvantage to begin with (a prespective similar to that of many minority teachers regarding the approach that places exclusive emphasis on process in teaching writing, see p. 18 below). Other parents prefer for the school to incorp rate the home language and culture into the content and methods of instruction, believir g that their children will be more likely to develop pride in their language and ethnic he ritage.

In fact, both approaches have been successful in different contexts (Heath, 1983b; Au & Jordan, 1981) perhaps because language is not the only -- or even the most important--determinant of student success. Attempting to understand the poor academic performance of non-mainstream students solely by reference to a language mismatch between home and school, "without discussing the political nature of language in school and society, is to provide the system with an excuse for institutionalized inequalities" (Villegas, 1988, p. 260). Nevertheless, language is the medium through which instruction takes place, and non-mainstream students do suffer becaus their language use does not meet the expectations of their mainstream teachers. Thus, taking steps to make education accessible and equitable requires choosing a plan of action vis-a-vis language in the school.

Attitudes toward bilingualism. This brings us to our second point with regard to language: The school more frequently than not undermines the positive role students' native languages can play in facilitating their literacy acquisition. There is abundant evidence that the ability to approach learning tasks effectively is best acquired through the native language, which, in concert with prior experience, conditions the development of thinking skills (Cummins, 1986). However, despite the self-proclaimed image of Americans as a "nation of immigrants," the prevailing attitude in the U.S. has always been fear and dread of the effects of multilingualism and multiculturalism. The English-Only movement and the resistance to bilingual education may be viewed as expressions of that fear and dread, i.e.,

as responses to the perceived encroachment of other languages and the imagined future hegemony of other cultures.

Given the implicit bottom line that the introduction of languages other than standard English has negative repercussions and that everyone must learn English, it is no wonder that there is so little support for allowing children to learn to read and write in whatever language they are most comfortable and fluent, despite strong evidence that such an approach is most effective (Cummins, 1989). It is also no wonder that the public holds such paradoxical views of bilingualism: The activity of learning English as a non-native language is associated with the low status of newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Conversely, learning a "foreign" language is deemed to be a demanding activity, associated with higher education and culture. On the basis of this logic, native English-speaking teenagers learning Castillan Spanish in high school have stamina and tenacity, whereas Spanish-speaking children learning English are "problem" students, and, if they use their native Mexican or Puerto Rican dialect in class, "reluctant learners."

The fact that students come to schools with diverse language and literacy experiences is too often viewed only as evidence that some students lack adequate preparation rather than as the asset that it is. All students bring valuable experiences and skills to school and it is our job to find ways to tap those resources. We can begin by allowing our students to use their native languages in our classes when it facilitates their communication and learning rather than insisting on the exclusive use of English. We can learn a second language ourselves to better understand our students' task of learning English. We can advocate for bilingualism for all children and for respect for the use of other languages besides English.

Curriculum and Instruction

We have focused our attention up to now primarily on students -- their personal, sociocultural, and linguistic backgrounds -- and on societal attitudes and educational

practices. We now turn to areas in which educators have more direct influence in determining practices: curriculum and instruction.

Ethnocentric curriculum design and instructional strategies. Although by now there is considerable research on literacy acquisition by non-mainstream students, current approaches to literacy instruction for minorities are still founded on research and practice in the language development of middle-class, English-speaking children (Langer, 1988). Since relatively few models for successful literacy instruction to non-mainstream groups are available, the same instructional strategies used with mainstream students tend to be used with minority students, often without adaptation to make them more appropriate for different types of students. For example, the emphasis on fluency among "progressive" teachers using the process approach to teach writing has been criticized by African American teachers because it de-emphasizes the development of "skills" sorely needed by many African American students (Delpit, 1986). This approach is now used by many teachers of non-native English speakers as well, whose need to develop skills in English is certainly beyond question.

In literacy curriculum and instruction, as in other areas, language minority students are served most effectively when both their differences from and similarities to mainstream students are taken into account. On the one hand, we need to explore promising approaches to the literacy instruction of minority students rather than uncritically borrowing methods designed for mainstream students, such as the process approach to teaching writing. On the other hand, we should not divide language into meaningless pieces for skill-oriented drill with minority or mainstream students. Students need to become skilled both at producing grammatically correct and sophisticated language and at thinking critically and creatively (Delpit, 1986). We must make sure that our curricula and instructional strategies provide them with the amount of guidance in developing both that is appropriate to their individual and group needs.

Because the school generally does not consider the cultural and language differences between mainstream students and language minority students as relevant to curriculum development, curricula and instructional approaches are frequently ethnocentric. But there are several ways in which we can incorporate such differences into curriculum and instruction. We can:

•Organize our classrooms so that students have a variety of means for succeeding. We can insure that students from cultures in which social relations are strongly based on cooperation, for example, will thrive in classrooms rather than forcing them to conform to a system where competition and individual achievement are the sole means to success.

•Encourage students not to abandon their first language but to become biliterate so that they can develop the sense of pride in their heritage which fosters achievement.

•Ask students to write on subjects about which they have some knowledge and interest so that they will be more engaged and will learn more.

•Include non-European literature, history, art and the contributions of non-Europeans to science and mathematics in our curricula. How many students know about the history of Mexicans in the Southwest U.S.? How many have read about the expansion of Europeans across North America from the perspective of Native American people? How many know that Thomas Alva Edison was Hispanic or that the person who discovered cortisone was an African American scientist named Percy Julian?

The most effective curriculum and instruction for all students focuses on meaning, takes student interests and prior knowledge into account, involves students and teachers as active participants in learning, and encourages students to become engaged in decision-making and problem solving. All students benefit when teachers value what students do and believe and when they facilitate student involvement in authentic literacy experiences while at the same time requiring students to meet high standards of formal correctness and appropriateness.

Ability grouping

The final issue we want to consider is the grouping of students according to supposed "abilities." Mainstream students tend to be placed in advanced classes while non-mainstream students find themselves in "remedial" classes or in the "low" groups within heterogeneous classes. In low-ability -- or "Basic Skills" - English classes and reading groups, students practice isolated subskills in boring exercises characterized by redundancy and irrelevancy; they concentrate on grammar, punctuation, spelling, or decoding exercises and practice simple memory or comprehension tasks rather than reading good literature, writing extended text, or practicing problem solving or critical thinking skills (see Collins, 1988; Graves, 1978; Oakes, 1985). Thus, they are never given the chance to develop the skills that they are penalized for not having. At best, they are being trained to become "the low-level functionaries of dominant society" (Delpit, 1986, p. 384).

Such grouping invariably works to the disadvantage of minority students, leading to consistent "low-ability" tracking (Medina, 1988; Oakes 1985). In fact, we might ask whether the hidden intention of ability grouping is to perpetuate the distinction between those who have and those who do not have literacy skills. As difficult as it is for us to face the monsters of racism, ethnocentrism, and classism that he points to, we might consider the questions posed by Hendrix (1981):

> How many really able writers does society need or want? Especially if we take writing capability as something beyond mere skill--as involving critical insight, originality, control over one's own purposes--it is not at all clear that writing ability would really be accepted as a universal goal of education (p. 66).

And so the marginalization of minority students is perpetuated: the students learn to expect that they will be taught little of value in school and that they are better advised to reserve their creative energies for extra-academic activities; the school learns to expect minimal performance and achievement from minority students. The outcome: language

minority students whose literacy skills are insufficient to allow them real mobility in society.

Conclusion

North American society and the school-age population in particular are characterized by increasing linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, and students from non-mainstream backgrounds are not equitably served by the educational system. They are expected to conform to mainstream norms in order to participate fully in schooling. Until very recently little research has documented the pedagogic strategies which are most effective with minority students.

Strategies to increase minority student achievement will succeed only if educators are willing to struggle with socialized racism, classism, linguocentrism, and the other -isms and to engage in self-examination. Growing up in North America, we all adopt some racist and exclusionary thinking. All of us must consider our own cultural backgrounds and values to become more aware of our expectations and the messages we are conveying to our students. We need to examine the attitudes we have been socialized to hold about others and the stereotypes we have about the sociocultural groups our students come from. We must ask ourselves whether we have lower expectations of minority students than of mainstream students and how those expectations may play themselves out in our classrooms.

In the meantime, we can take constructive steps to increase the equity of literacy instruction to language minority students. Here are some which are especially relevant to the issues we have raised in this paper:

1. Examine our own attitudes and beliefs about diversity (through reflection, reading, writing, attending conferences, seeing films, discussion with friends and colleagues).
2. Assume that all students, including language minority students, can achieve.
3. Assume that all students, including language minority students, can become critical thinkers and writers.

4. Assume that schools and teachers can take steps to facilitate their literacy development and overall achievement.
5. Assume that we educators are in part responsible for the success or failure of language minority students and find ways to help them succeed.
6. Hold the same high expectations for the achievement of language minority students as for mainstream students and communicate this belief in the possibility of their attainment.
7. Vary our teaching strategies based on context and cultural variables, using such approaches as journal writing, literature study, language experience activities, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, community-based activities.
8. Be vigilant to maintain an overall balance in our perceptions of our students as individuals and as products of sociocultural influences.
9. Learn about individual preferences, experiences, and personalities as well as social and cultural values and behavior, especially as they relate to literacy.
10. Incorporate students' extra-school interests in our classes and relate them to classroom literacy activities.
11. Incorporate content from and about diverse groups in the curriculum.
12. Engage students in meaningful, authentic reading and writing about their experiences and beliefs and the literacy events in their lives.
13. Find out what skills and resources our students bring with them to class and explore ways to use those resources.
14. Do not group students according to so-called "abilities" and work against such grouping in all contexts. Engage all students in problem-solving and higher-order thinking.
15. Allow our students to use their native languages.
16. Expand our understanding of the language acquisition process and of language minority students' experiences by learning a second language.

17. Advocate for recognition and support of the use of other languages besides English on official and unofficial levels.

Taking these steps will lead to a radical departure from educational tradition in this country. But what other choice do we have? We cannot continue on the road we have been traveling -- supporting cultural pluralism with our rhetoric, while perpetuating the structural inequities in the educational system. Educators -- teachers, administrators, researchers -- are the most potent force for educational change. It is time for us to step forth and use our power.

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